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Crafts, Specialists, and Markets in Mycenaean Greece

Economic Interplay Among Households and States

CYNTHIA W. SHELMERDINE

Abstract

This Forum has made progress on both its stated research themes: control of craft production and the newer topic of markets. My comments take up the issues of household economy, state control, and markets. First, I discuss developments at the second-order center of Nichoria, which show both independent activity and the effect of incorporation into the state of Pylos. Excavation of another such settlement at Iklaina promises to support and expand on the findings from Nichoria. State control is another subject for discussion; the evidence suggests some differences between prestige goods and ordinary pottery, concerning both production and consumption. Finally, I argue that the existence of markets is well supported by both archaeological and textual data.

Chadwick's *The Mycenaean World* introduced to the world of Aegean studies a whole new field of inquiry. His was the first general account of Late Bronze Age Greece based almost entirely on contemporary documentary evidence. He stressed that the Linear B tablets were palatial documents focused on matters of interest to the central administration. The palatial perspective naturally dominated subsequent research on Mycenaean economy and society for a time, but Chadwick readily acknowledged that this was only a partial view of Mycenaean culture: "It is very hard from our records to form a picture of the ordinary people and imagine what sort of lives they led."¹ It was left to a later generation of scholars to look for traces of these ordinary Mycenaeans outside the palaces and, to varying degrees, outside the palatial economy.

This trend has been productive in several ways. For one thing, the thoughtful interplay between textual and archaeological research has heightened awareness of commodities and processes not monitored by Myce-

naean scribes and thus not under palatial control.² For another, comparison of Mycenaean states has shown that despite important similarities, they developed and operated differently—this is not surprising, given their different local histories and environments.³ Finally, it should now be generally accepted that the redistributive model is inadequate to characterize even those aspects of the Mycenaean economy that were under tight palatial control. Even a binary palatial/nonpalatial formulation is too simple. In a recent compilation of evidence, I suggested that "[a] more productive model is a continuum, with individuals and groups involved in various ways and to various degrees with the central palatial administration, from full dependence to greater or less interaction to no contact at all."⁴

This wider and more flexible vision of Mycenaean economy is well exemplified by the contributors to this Forum. The palaces are rightly viewed as consumers, not just producers, and regional considerations are important to the discussion. The stated focus here is on craft specialization and markets. The first is well documented for the Mycenaean states, both textually and archaeologically. The second is a much newer topic in Aegean studies, but the discussion is now wide open.

Much in these papers deserves comment. There are some nice smaller points throughout. Parkinson et al. take the concept of one-stop shopping back to the Bronze Age, proposing that there were regional centers for the production and distribution of multiple products.⁵ Hruby reinforces Nakassis' argument that *qe-ta-ko* at Pylos was both a smith and a potter,⁶ by observing that both professions required expert control of firing conditions. As to the larger research themes, all the contributors mention the need for more data from household contexts; all are concerned with the

¹ Chadwick 1976, 77.

² Halstead 1992; Killen 1998; Whitelaw 2001.

³ Shelmerdine 1999.

⁴ Shelmerdine 2011, 19.

⁵ Parkinson et al. 2013.

⁶ Nakassis 2006, 531; Hruby 2013.

profiles of the different Mycenaean states as both producers and consumers; and all offer support of different kinds for the existence of markets. The study of pottery in particular links these topics together.

In regard to household archaeology, Nichoria has until very recently offered the only opportunity in Messenia to examine a second-order center and its interaction with the palatial center. Aprile makes the most of this opportunity, though the data are not always up to the job.⁷ As I well remember from my own part in this project, much of the material is scrappy; prestige artifacts are rare in domestic deposits, and some parts of the hill remain unexcavated. Aprile treats Late Helladic (LH) IIIA and IIIB together, citing the difficulty of analyzing diachronic change between the two periods. It would be useful to add some chronological refinements, though, and this is in fact possible in some cases. Several of the houses (Units III-2, III-6, IV-3, IV-6, IV-7) were remodeled during LH IIIB, and different floor levels can be distinguished. Taking such changes into account would require adding the level of intra-household analysis to the inquiry. But this is not necessary for considering the crucial disjunction at the end of LH IIIA1. At that point, the megaron (Unit IV-4) went out of use; most of the household units in Areas III and IV, and also the tholos, were built subsequently, during LH IIIA2. If these developments were a consequence of the assimilation of Nichoria into the Pylian state, as seems likely,⁸ they are directly relevant to the comparison of households at the site. It is also worth keeping in mind that a tomb assemblage is not strictly comparable to a domestic context, though both do document goods to which a settlement had access. Thus, Aprile's two elite contexts, megaron and tholos, differ both functionally and chronologically.

These points aside, Aprile's results are interesting and helpful. Regarding household provisioning, she finds little difference between the assemblages in the megaron and those in the other houses, suggesting little distinction between elites and nonelites in the acquisition of household goods. This observation is based in part on the distribution of kylikes, which are in fact ubiquitous at all Mycenaean settlements, from palace to village. I think she is right, therefore, to distinguish between the low value of the kylix itself and the high social value of its use in feasting. (The miniature kylix is of course a different matter, as she

notes.) Cooking tripods tell a similar story. As well as the two from the megaron (P3637, P3638) mentioned by Aprile, there are two numbered examples from nonelite domestic contexts (P3735 from Deposit L23 OPfg Wall A; P3736 from Unit IV-6, Room 3).⁹ Like the kylikes, they show that elites and nonelites at Nichoria had the same basic needs for routine vessels. The sources, too, may be the same. Tripods at Nichoria are of a distinctive Messenian shape, derived from the Minoan type, with vertical handles below an incurving rim. They thus exhibit a regional preference that extends across status boundaries.

Excavations now in progress at the settlement site of Iklaina, under the auspices of the Archaeological Society at Athens, are certain to provide further material for similar analysis.¹⁰ The site is probably to be identified with the district capital *a-pu₂-we* mentioned in Linear B tablets from Pylos. The Mycenaean history of the site shows some parallels to that of Nichoria, including a disjunction early in LH IIIA2 and subsequent construction of several houses. No sealstones have been found to date, but figurines are concentrated in a few specific contexts, and fragments of several miniature kylikes have also come to light. It will be important to analyze the find contexts of both as study continues.¹¹ Household pottery, however, is distributed throughout the excavated area without apparent status distinctions. Fine wares are of the usual fabrics and shapes (little decoration survives), but coarse wares tell a more interesting story. The tripods in all contexts are of the same Messenian shape as those from Nichoria. Two coarse fabric types common in the Early Mycenaean period are unusual, without parallel at Nichoria or even at Pylos; they seem to be quite local products. LH IIIA-B coarse fabrics are less distinctive, bearing out suggestions in this Forum that pottery production was carried out by fewer manufacturers working on a larger scale (see more below).

Aprile also notes distinctions in clay color at Nichoria, for both pottery and figurines, as a possible measure of elite status.¹² It is true that there are two major fine ware fabric types at Nichoria, as at Iklaina, but chronology again plays a role. The very soft greenish-white fabric (e.g., Munsell 10YR 8/1–8/2) is characteristic of late LH IIIB fine ware at both sites; the buff fabric (e.g., 7.5YR 7/4), sometimes with a pinkish core (e.g., 5YR 7/3), dominated earlier, though both types occurred from LH IIIA onward. The color

⁷Aprile 2013.

⁸Bennet 1999, 143.

⁹Shelmerdine 1992, 502, 542.

¹⁰Online excavation reports at www.iklaina.org; see also

Cosmopoulos 2006.

¹¹Miniature kylikes are also reported from chamber tombs at Volimidia (Blegen and Rawson 1966, 366).

¹²Supra n. 7.

distinction is due not to a difference in clay but to firing conditions, which a potter could control to some extent. Further, the soft greenish-white fabric is typically unpainted; the decorated pottery is almost always buff throughout or pink at the core with a buff surface. Mycenaean figurines, which also bear painted decoration, are also buff or pink/buff, so the rarity of greenish-white figurines is not surprising, and the fabric probably represents low rather than high value. Even the greenish-white pottery from the Palace of Nestor seems to have resulted from the mass production of intrinsically low-value vessels. They were often poorly and quickly made; Hruby calls the quality of many “abysmal.”¹³ The fabric is much harder than the soft, powdery stuff from Nichoria and Iklaina, though of course it was subjected to extra firing during the destruction.

I turn now to another important theme of this Forum, the issue of state control. The emphasis throughout on the different trajectories for Mycenaean states is very welcome. It is true that I think the nature of the Knossos Linear B administration owes something to the Minoan historical background, as well as to the contribution of contemporary Minoan elites to the innovations introduced.¹⁴ But the case for differences among mainland states is strong, too. Given the available evidence, the debate necessarily centers on Messenia and the Argolid. Pullen follows Voutsaki in arguing that competition with other polities in the Argolid led Mycenae to exert tight palatial control over the production of prestige goods.¹⁵ But he goes further in extending the argument to ceramics as well, citing in support Thomas’ study of a LH IIIB1 deposit from Tsoungiza, which resembles palatial assemblages in its percentages of functional shape categories and, for painted pottery, in its range of decorative motifs.¹⁶ I look forward to reading the paper that lays out the argument in greater detail.¹⁷ I agree that the standardization of Mycenaean fine wares, in both shapes and decoration, suggests a limited number of mass producers. So far, however, I prefer Thomas’ own suggestion, that “the palaces were dipping into a stream of production aimed at the general consumer rather than controlling production outright.”¹⁸ The absence of ceramic production from extant Linear B tablets supports this idea. Pottery is quite different from prestige

goods made of gold, ivory, and the like. The raw material was local and available; indeed, it would have been difficult to restrict access to a clay bed once its location was known. The finished product was in universal demand, and Aprile shows for Nichoria, as Thomas did for Tsoungiza, that the same types are found in elite and nonelite contexts.¹⁹ For the pottery workshop at Petsas House, outside the citadel wall at Mycenae, Shelton speaks of palatial interest, rather than control, and of certain vessel shapes (kylix, conical cup, stirrup jar) as being “palatially motivated” rather than palatially produced.²⁰ Pullen, too, very persuasively discusses the power of the palaces as consumers. Their ability to command resources, as they did for feasting contributions, flax, and taxable goods at Pylos, enabled them to set “‘standards’ of consumption” that smaller settlements like Tsoungiza emulated to some extent.²¹ The presence of Linear B tablets in Petsas House is an unequivocal indicator that the central administration up the hill was involved in its activities to some extent. This does not mean, however, that the palace was the only customer, or even that it controlled distribution of all the workshop’s products.

Petsas House was destroyed late in LH IIIA2, making it earlier than the LH IIIB high point of central administration at Mycenae. Would the situation have looked any different in mid LH IIIB, if the workshop had continued? For a possible answer, we must look to Berbati, which used the same clay source as Petsas House and which expanded in LH IIIB, after Petsas House went out of use.²² In particular, if the Mastos workshop produced a specialized line of decorated kraters in LH IIIB for export eastward, as Åkerström suggested,²³ one imagines that the palace commissioned those vessels, but did it fully control their production? Did it, in LH IIIB, take over the organization of a previously independent workshop? Berbati’s location at some distance from Mycenae is not a problem; the Linear B evidence makes it clear that the palaces could control industries situated well away from the center. But the situation seems different from that at Pylos, where Hruby shows that a single potter probably crafted at least half the fine wares from the palace (and not just kylikes).²⁴ He was indeed plausibly the “royal” potter mentioned on PY Eo 371, and the landholding listed there was probably compensation

¹³ Hruby 2013, 424.

¹⁴ Shelmerdine 1999, 564 (cited in Parkinson et al. 2013, n. 12); Bennet 2008, 19–22; Preston 2008.

¹⁵ Pullen 2013; see also Voutsaki 2010.

¹⁶ Thomas 2005.

¹⁷ Parkinson and Pullen (forthcoming).

¹⁸ Thomas 2005, 540.

¹⁹ Supra n. 7.

²⁰ Shelton 2010, 193.

²¹ Pullen 2013, 441.

²² Mommsen et al. 2002; Galaty 2010, 240–41.

²³ Åkerström 1968.

²⁴ Hruby 2013.

for his work. This is a much more direct relationship than can be demonstrated for Petsas House or even for Berbati. The tablets show that Pylos also made occasional use of other potters, so different patterns of acquisition and consumption clearly coexisted there.

It has often been observed in Linear B studies that the Pylos administration seems more centralized than that of Knossos: the textile industry was concentrated in a few places; there were fewer “collectors,” and even fewer scribes.²⁵ It may be true that Mycenae exerted still tighter control over the production of prestige goods than did Pylos, despite the latter’s control of bronze. As to ceramic production, different mechanisms may have operated in the Argolid, as they did in Messenia. The palace may have controlled production of special export ware but not expended the same kind of administrative effort on ordinary vessels, which could be acquired more readily. The documentary evidence from Mycenae does not get us much further. A potter probably receives wool on tablet MY Oe 125 from the House of the Oil Merchant. Sealings Wt 501–507 from the House of the Sphinxes concern vessels and probably accompanied their delivery to the house; they were found in the doorway of Room 1, which contained about 1,000 pots. Tablet MY Ue 611, from Room 6 of the same house, gives a list of vessels on the recto without indicating whether they are coming in or going out (given the small number, it is less likely that this tablet is a storage inventory). That the vessels were recorded at all shows palatial interest but not how or where they were acquired.

My final comments on these Forum Articles concern markets. It is worth appreciating how much different evidence is adduced here in favor of their existence, from the local level on up the scale. Chadwick thought that control of Mycenaean exchange lay exclusively in the hands of the king, and he was dubious about independent traders and markets: “It is not unlikely that some sort of a market existed in Mycenaean towns, at which surplus food could change hands; but the presence of a regular merchant class is highly questionable, so long as no documentary evidence can be found to support such a view.”²⁶

Parkinson et al. actually cite this passage as suggesting regional markets, because it at least begins to imagine some low-level exchange outside the palaces.²⁷ However, the concept of true independent markets is

explored more persuasively in this Forum, partly because the authors follow Mesoamerican scholars in broadening the definition of “market.” Whereas earlier work based on the theories of Karl Polanyi focused on marketplaces and market systems, current research emphasizes market exchanges, specific transactions regardless of scale. There is a risk here: in some formulations, the definition of a market seems so loose as to obscure useful nuances so that any negotiated transaction could qualify as a market exchange.²⁸

Nevertheless, taking a variety of approaches to the question has good cumulative effect. Differential payment systems shed light on the labor market at Pylos.²⁹ Equivalences of value among commodities on the Linear B tablets take their place, along with standardized weights and measures,³⁰ as ways of facilitating exchange at all levels of society. Some of the points made here in other contexts are also relevant. One is the ability of individuals in Mycenaean states to play multiple roles and to negotiate transactions with the state to their own benefit.³¹ Another is the role of palaces as participants in the economy. Halstead, for example, has argued that local shepherds managing palatial sheep flocks interchanged animals with herds under local control to the benefit of both parties.³² Such exchanges surely also took place at the private or community level, without palatial involvement. Occasionally, we may even see written evidence of transactions to which the palace was not a party. For example, three nodules at Knossos record transactions between places (KN Wm 8493) or individuals (KN Wm 1707, 8499). The palace is clearly interested in these exchanges of wool and textiles, and two of the three nodules (KN Wm 8493, 8499) are inscribed in known scribal hands, but all three are unstamped. The lack of seal impressions may show that the palace was not directly involved in the transactions. Thus, there can exist a distinction between the notions of “monitoring” and “control.”³³

Textual evidence also suggests that palatial administrators had increasingly less interest in and control over affairs in parts of the state farther from the center.³⁴ These limits and constraints on palatial interest probably applied to wider markets just as they did within states. If palaces were the beneficiaries of trade conducted by others, for instance, the dearth of tablets pertaining to the management of the process is less

²⁵ Killen 1984; Olivier 1984; Shelmerdine 1999.

²⁶ Chadwick 1976, 158.

²⁷ *Supra* n. 5.

²⁸ Hirth 2010, 229 (cited in Aprile 2013).

²⁹ *Supra* n. 24.

³⁰ Pullen 2013.

³¹ Nakassis 2006, 2008.

³² Halstead 2001, 41–4.

³³ Shelmerdine (forthcoming).

³⁴ Killen 2008, 166–71; Shelmerdine 2011, 23–4.

surprising than if trade was truly under royal control. Shipwrecks add further evidence for market systems at work.³⁵ The ship that went down at Uluburun late in LH IIIA2, in Aegean chronology, had a cargo largely consisting of elite raw materials, from glass ingots to terebinth resin to copper and tin. It was heading west toward the Aegean, and two Mycenaean officials were on board,³⁶ but this was not a Mycenaean enterprise. The ship itself was probably Phoenician, and the materials and finished objects on board came from a variety of sources. It probably had more than one destination, too, as did the Gelidonya ship roughly a century later. This was clearly an independent vessel whose crew did some bronzeworking as well as trading around the Aegean.³⁷ Crafts, trade, and markets: the evidence is there, and the articles in this Forum show a variety of ways to make good use of it.

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³⁵ Mee 2008, 364–65.

³⁶ Pulak 1998, 2005; Bachhuber 2006.

³⁷ Bass 1967, 1991.

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